

FORT HOOD LIVING

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Learning from loss *Honoring the fallen*

Instructor passes on hard-won knowledge

By Heather Graham
Sentinel Living Editor

Hard losses make for hard teachers.

No one knows that lesson better than Maj. Allen Hahn.

Hahn, 1-1 Aviation Combined Arms Training team chief, 21st Cavalry Brigade (Air Combat), has lost nine friends to aviation incidents in the past three years. As an attack pilot and tactics instructor to Longbow Apache pilots, the losses have affected him personally and professionally.

The roster of his fallen fellow aviators and friends is becoming extensive — CWO 3 Andy Robbins was killed when his Apache hit cable car wires June 8, 2003, in Kosovo; 4th Infantry Division pilots CWO 4 Chuck Fortenberry and CWO 2 Shane Colton were shot down April 11, 2004, in Taji, Iraq; CWO 3 Aaron Cowen and Capt. Dion Burnaz were killed when their aircraft hit a mountain Feb. 26, 2005, in South Korea; 4th Inf. Div.'s CWO 4 Richard "Matt" Salter and CWO 2 Isaias Santos died when another military aircraft collided with their Apache Dec. 26, 2005, in Taji, Iraq; and 4th Inf. Div. pilots CWO 3 Rex Kenyon and CWO 2 Raul Garcia were killed when their aircraft was shot down Jan. 16 in Taji.

While all of the deaths hit him hard, Salter's death was different for Hahn.

"Matt and I kept each other sane," Hahn said. "He was my best friend and brother."

Salter was the one to whom he could go with any problem.

"He told you what you had to hear, not what you wanted to hear," Hahn said.

Salter was driven, Hahn recalled. "When he started something he wanted to finish it," he said.

The hardest thing for Hahn is the plans he and Salter made but will never complete. "You make plans with somebody. Then that person is gone," he said.

Among the plans the two had made: going to Salter's ranch near Kerrville, joining the Masons, and learning to play guitar. For Hahn, those things have lost their importance.

"They are not a priority anymore," he said.

Instead, he focuses on his job, training pilots to combat ready status on the Longbow Apache. If anything, the losses in his life have made Hahn a more serious, more critical teacher.

Having trained eight of the nine lost pilots, Hahn admitted to some second-guessing of himself after the deaths of Cowan and Burnaz. He does not blame himself.

He knows the tactics taught are valid and do work, but pilots are human and things can go wrong. Hahn admits he is harder on pilots now because he has so often seen what can happen when something

goes wrong, through human error or otherwise.

"I was a hard-ass before, now I am more of a hard-ass," he said.

He understands the risk involved with his chosen profession and works to instill those risks in the minds of those he trains.

"Everything we do is inherently dangerous," he acknowledged. "Takeoff is optional, but landing is mandatory." One way or another, the aircraft will return to the ground.

When in command of a \$28 million Longbow Apache helicopter, any mistake can be fatal. For that reason, Hahn is strict in his training to ensure the mistakes made here in simulators and on the ground do not carry over into real-life situations.

"You can (mess up) here; can't do that in Iraq, Kosovo, Afghanistan," Hahn said. "If I don't make them understand that, I haven't done my job."

Hahn has had his own demons to face after the losses of his friends and co-workers.

He dislikes holidays now. Fortenberry died Easter Sunday 2004 and Salter deployed on Veteran's Day and was killed the day after Christmas 2005. Robbins died the day after Hahn's birthday in 2003.

Following Salter's death, it took Hahn 34 days before he could fly again, a long time considering flying helicopters is his profession. "I thought I was jinxed," he said. "I thought no one would want to fly with me."

In fact, the opposite was true. His fellow pilots were more than willing to fly with him.

One co-worker, CWO 5 Steve Gilbreth, has been especially supportive and helpful to Hahn. "He's my rock because I have to be everyone else's rock," Hahn said of Gilbreth.

Talking to the family members of his fallen friends has helped, Hahn said. He keeps in contact with the family members of several of his fallen friends and co-workers, considering the relationships mutually beneficial.

Otherwise, Hahn turns off the internal noise and leaves everything on the ground because he knows he has to.

"You don't have time to grieve; you'll get yourself killed," he acknowledged.

"The aircraft," he added, "is a jealous bitch. Everything has to be about her."

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- Maj. Allen Hahn, 21st Cav. Bde. (Air Combat)



Photo by Heather Graham, Sentinel Living Editor



Illustration by Molly Davis, Sentinel Design Editor
Native Texan CWO 4 Richard "Matt" Salter, 4th Inf. Div. was killed Dec. 26, 2005 when his Apache collided with another military aircraft.

Riders to honor pilot who died in Iraq

By Brian Smith
Sentinel Sports Editor

It all started with wanting to honor a friend.

"Blaise 'N A Trail to D.C." was started last year by Mike Clarke, who wanted to honor his friend CWO 3 Mike Blaise, who was killed in Iraq.

Clarke organized a group of motorcycle riders to ride to Washington, D.C., as part of the annual Rolling Thunder cross country ride. Rolling Thunder was begun more than 30 years ago as a way to protest North Vietnamese treatment of POWs, according to Maj. Allen Hahn, plans and operations chief, 21st Cavalry Brigade (Air Combat).

With last year's trip completed and a success, Clarke began looking to continue the ride. This year's honoree will be CWO 4 Matt Salter of the 4th Infantry Division, who was killed late last year in Iraq. Salter's brother-in-law, Jeff Ward, explained how Salter was chosen.

"Clarke is a member of the Patriot Guard, which is a group of riders that do a lot of things at funerals of fellow riders, working security and the like," Ward said. "Quite a few people came to pay their respects to Matt, and Clarke thought he would be the perfect guy to honor with a ride this year."

Clarke then contacted Ward's wife Sara, who along with Ward, had moved from the D.C. area four years ago. She agreed that Salter would be perfect and the plans to set up the ride were on.

One of the riders set to leave for the trip May 24-31 will be retired CWO 4 Ron Barloon, who was a good friend of Salter's for 10 years.

"I've flown with him as both a wingman and in the cockpit," said Barloon, who now is a civilian working at West Fort Hood running the Longbow Apache helicopter simulator. "Riding in this ride will be a true testament to my constitution."

Barloon also knew Salter on a personal level as well, playing a lot of golf with him. He remembered a phrase Matt used that he will keep in his heart forever.

"On windy days he would always say, 'Swing easy in the breezy,'" Barloon said. "He was always

great with a laugh, which is what I'll remember about him."

Barloon said he has done several 500-1,000 miles in the past but says this will be a long ride. He says he's ready to honor his friend.

"My back or butt may get sore," Barloon said with a laugh. "If it gets too bad, I'll hop in the truck with my wife Wanda to take a break."

The ride will begin from Salter's home and will head northeast across the country. The Blaise 'N Trails group will hook up with the massive Rolling Thunder group, which reportedly has close to 1 million riders, for a candlelight vigil at the Vietnam Veterans Memorial May 26 before riding into Washington on May 27.

The Rolling Thunder ride will not be the only posthumous memorial for Salter.

An alumnus of Texas A&M University, he was honored in April at the school's annual Aggie Muster, a solemn ceremony in which Aggies who have died since the previous year's muster are remembered.

Salter was also the first active-duty Soldier to receive military honors at the Texas State Veterans' Cemetery in Killeen, although he is not buried there.

Salter's widow, Janet, wished to go on the ride, but other family commitments will keep her back here.

"I'm hummed I can't go this year, but Matt's oldest daughter will be graduating high school May 28, so I will be at that," Janet Salter said. "I think it's amazing what they're doing and am totally honored that they're doing this for Matt."

Janet Salter said she wanted to drive one of the support vehicles or thought about flying to Washington to meet the local riders.

One rider who was ready to go but will be unable to do so is Hahn, one of Salter's best friends, who will be training troops at that time as part of a new position.

"I'm disappointed I'm not getting to go, but the job is more important to train the troops than to do (the ride)," Hahn said.

Hahn has seen Salter and another friend and co-worker pass away in the recent months and was hoping to honor Salter with a ride.

That will be left to others.

